

PLAY TIME

**Peter Hinton
channels the bard**

PAGE 42

CANNED HEAT

**Three top chefs
take the \$25 challenge**

PAGE 51

DRESS UP

**Richard Robinson
gets a gallery show**

PAGE 16

OTTAWA

magazine



**Shawarma, sushi,
falafel, and pho:**
The everything guide
for the gourmet
on a budget

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Contents

September 2007 Vol. 10 No. 3



“The front of the house is the ego, and the back lane is the id”

- Evan Thornton

33

FEATURES

33 Romance and Graffiti: Ottawa's Back Alleys

Over the years, many alleys were encroached on by sheds and garages, blocked by walls and fences, sold by the city, or swallowed up into backyards or parking lots. Now, though, people are vocal about the value of back alleys—the lane is on the comeback trail
BY ANITA LAHEY PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHRIS LALONDE

42 The Play's the Thing

After a controversial first season that—gasp!—included nary a whisper of Shakespeare, the NAC's artistic director of English theatre counters with a second-season lineup inspired by the classical repertoire and themed around the great playwright's work
BY SUZANNE EVANS

47 Big Bites for Small Change

Sushi, shawarma, pho, and falafel—*Ottawa Magazine* scours the city for deliciously affordable eating ideas that won't break the bank

Contents



COLUMNS

19 The Importance of Being Earnest

POLITICS Fantasy or possibility? On the surface, it sounds like a pipe dream, but the proposed Federal Department of Peace is backed by an increasing number of politically savvy agitators BY MARK FRUTKIN

25 For the Love of Good

PROFILE How Harold Funk progressed from small-town lawyer to disbarred Parliament Hill protester with a penchant for writing rambling discourses on the environment, pedophile priests, and world politics BY MARK BOURRIE

THIS CITY

13 Anarchy in the U of O • Taking a sledgehammer to GALLERY 101 • The art of being RICHARD ROBINSON • Rockcliffe's newest mansion

CITY SELECT

59 PICK 3

Festival X artist PEDRO ISZTIN dishes on the psychology of convincing your friends to pose in the nude

61 FOOD

The good, the bad, and the truly evil of the city's cheap takeout options

BY CHRIS KNIGHT

63 DRINK

Bargain in a Bottle: quality wines that don't break the bank BY NATALIE MACLEAN

63 TASTING NOTES

BY DAVID LAWRASON

67 RESTAURANTS

Maple sugar for grown-ups • British biscuits and cheese • Plus our star-rated reviews

72 SEPTEMBER

Crusty festival dish from animation head • DAVE COOPER's buxom babes • A great big BEETHOVEN bash

DEPARTMENTS

10 LETTERS

11 THIS ISSUE

78 THE END

PAGE 5: PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHRISTIAN LALONDE/
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THIS PAGE: PHOTOGRAPHY BY GRAHAM LAW

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This City

PROFILE

Anarchy in the U of O

Denis Rancourt wants to return academia to its freethinking roots; the establishment has other plans **BY RON CORBETT**



DENIS RANCOURT SAYS it was a book that changed his life—the sort of comment that, coming from a professor, doesn't surprise. Until you learn he didn't read the book when he was a boy.

The book was called *Disciplined Minds* and was written by Jeff Schmidt, a physicist in the United States who was fired from his job at *Physics Today* magazine after it was published seven years

ago. "Jeff is a friend now," says Rancourt. "I contacted him after reading his book and offered him any help I could in his fight against *Physics Today*. I think it's a terribly important book, one that every university student should read."

Disciplined Minds is a scathing indictment against university education and a professional career. It argues that instead of being bastions of freethinking peoples, universities today are little more than branch offices of large corporations. Free thought is discouraged. Dissent is forbidden. The purpose of your university degree is simply to show the world you are compliant and happily prepared to sell your soul.

Rancourt read the book, a dime dropped, and he became a very different teacher—as students in his first-year Physics and the Environment class in 2005 were soon to learn. "On the first day of classes, I told [the students] there would be no grades given at the end of the semester," remembers Rancourt. "I also told them they would be free to study what interested them. I basically squatted on the course. Academic squatting is what I call it."

The university had other words for it, and at the second class, there was a surprise guest—the dean of the faculty of science—who brought along the old curriculum, read it aloud to the students, and said this is what they would be learning. Any ques-

tions? At which point, he was peppered with questions. So many questions, from so many students, that he backed out of the classroom and didn't return. At the third class, he reappeared long enough to report that Rancourt was free to teach the class as he intended.

Later the university filed a disciplinary complaint against Denis Rancourt. Rancourt responded with one grievance and then another, asking for \$10 million in reparations. Since then both sides have killed a thousand trees in order to paper the other side. Rancourt has lost track of how many grievances he has against the university but estimates it's "around 10." The university has a similar number of disciplinary complaints against the professor. (The nadir perhaps came this past spring, when the university learned that two 10-year-olds had managed to enrol in what students dubbed the "activism course." The course has since been cancelled.)

It is a surprising twist to what had previously been an

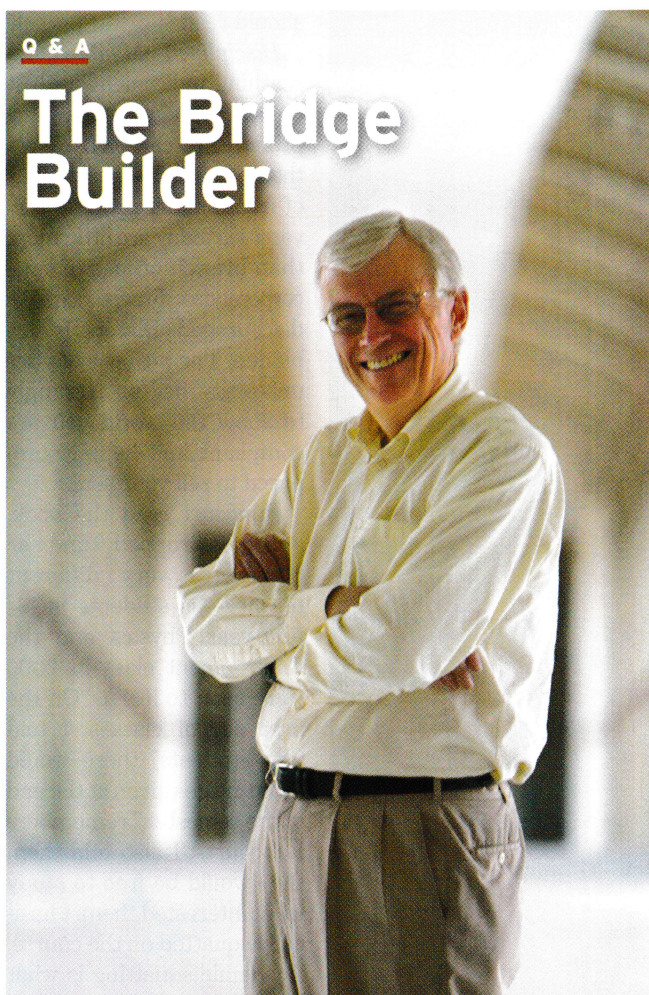
exemplary scientific career. Not so long ago Rancourt was considered a rising star at the University of Ottawa, the man who had solved the centuries-old "invar problem," (invar is a metal that, for reasons no one could fathom, did not expand under heat); the man who had brought more research funding into the physics department than any other professor; the man who had received his PhD at 27.

Today, when asked what his goals are as a university professor, the 50-year-old married father of two says: "To make anarchy an accepted way of doing things."

And what does the University of Ottawa have to say in response to Rancourt's allegations that it is a bureaucratic, hierarchical, butt-protecting place of little wisdom and less insight? Well, uh, not much actually.

"There is no way I am commenting about Professor Rancourt," says André Lalonde, acting dean of the Science Faculty. "The university has no comment either."

Now, that was a lively debate.



Russ Mills on city-gritty politics, media, and the river between us BY ROGER BIRD

The chair of the National Capital Commission has been thinking afresh about how ideas and infrastructure can unite or divide Ottawa-Gatineau

What's at the top of the priority list for the city's transportation infrastructure?

"We really need another bridge over the Ottawa River, east of the Macdonald-Cartier. There are too many trucks going down King Edward Avenue. It's impossible to think of great cities like London and Paris without their underground transportation."

The 1950 Greber Commission report recommended establishing the greenbelt. Has it been successful?

"The greenbelt isn't green. It has become the pollution belt" with thousands of commuters driving across it every day between downtown jobs and suburban homes on the far side of what was supposed to be tranquil green space. Mills says when the greenbelt became an agent for urban sprawl and traffic, it was a classic play-out of the law of unintended consequences.

The NCC's role is to connect two provinces and two cities in its mission to animate and promote Canada's capital. Is it successful?

"The things the NCC does, like Gatineau Park and the Canal Skateway, are loved by the people of Ottawa, but the NCC itself is not loved."

That may have something to do with the lack of daylight the NCC in the past has allowed into its operations.

"The NCC will be following the general advice of the [federal government's] mandate review task force and making the meetings as open as possible...it is a bit early to say what this will mean" in practice. "One important step will be to get the spending authority of the NCC

raised so that board decisions are actual decisions that can be made public and not just recommendations to Treasury Board which must remain confidential."

When you were the editor and publisher of the *Ottawa Citizen*, how did you define the newspaper's role?

"I defined the newspaper's role as a very public one. The newspaper was not just an ordinary business. I spent about 40 per cent of my time out of my office."

Is there a cultural division across the greenbelt line? Numbers in the last municipal election show a clash of 'burbs versus core with Mayor O'Brien winning in the suburbs, while Alex Munter got most of the votes in the city.

"Yes, it's disturbing," Mills says. He recalled office events at the *Citizen* when staffers would meet at a downtown restaurant. "I was astonished at the number of people—with homes in the suburbs—who would say they hadn't been downtown 'for several years.' Not weeks or months, but years!"

The best kind of lubricant for inter- and intra-city connections is money. How can you observe its effects from your perch at Algonquin, where you maintain your position as executive dean of the School of Media and Design?

"The tech sector is coming back," Mills says, citing a growing difficulty in attracting teachers to Algonquin and other post-secondary institutions and a decline in demand for upgrade courses by unemployed tech sector workers. "We survived the '90s bust. Ottawa is set to do well for a long time."